

LING 416 Language Universals and Typology

Prof. Suzanne Kemmer

Course Syllabus

This course is an exploration of the ways that human languages conventionally structure certain general ideas that all languages express, such as possession, motion, location, and numerous others. We will investigate how languages are similar to each other and different from each other by collecting and observing language data from multiple languages and extracting general patterns. These cross-linguistic patterns form the basis for the discovery of the range of variation of human languages, and the limits of that variation. Various types of explanations for cross-linguistic patterns of variation will be explored. Many of them can be understood as the result of properties of the human mind and of human communicative interaction, given what is known about these properties from the study of cognitive psychology and of interaction. The approach taken is that of functional-typological linguistics. In general, the course can be seen as a continuation of LING 300, which is strongly recommended as a prior course.

Course Objectives

Students should:

- Be able to locate linguistic data from reference grammars, gather and lay out the data relevant to particular grammatical topics in the ways that linguists present data to one another in professional contexts, and summarize it. Reading and understanding grammatical descriptions from reference grammars can be difficult but is an essential skill that must be developed in the course of becoming a linguist
- Be able to compare languages with respect to particular grammatical and/or lexical structures, and arrive at frameworks of comparison: general and specific typologies of particular structures (form-function units)
- Understand how cross-linguistic patterns can be used in conjunction with what is known about cognitive psychology, culture, and interaction to arrive at new knowledge about how people think and interact
- Understand something of the relation between cross-linguistic variation, language-internal variation, and language change

Readings

Articles on the specific topics will be assigned as needed.

Reference/background texts:

The textbooks from LING 200 and 300:

Genetti, Carol (ed.). 2014. *How Languages Work*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

Payne, Thomas. 1997. *Describing Morphosyntax: A Guide for Field Linguistics*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

Course management

Through Canvas. Students will upload their assignments (data summary and analysis) to specified parts of Canvas each week; observe each other's data; and try to find generalizations.

Assessments

- max. 8 submissions of language data/analysis from two genetically distant languages in each submission, found in reference grammars (i.e. primary sources rather than linguistics articles). Over the course of the semester, the submissions need to include data from at least 6 different languages, as genetically distant as possible. These are summaries of data extracted from reference grammars of languages on particular grammatical topics and analysis of the grammatical structures collected. Data is to be in the form of language examples with interlinear glosses and English translation (i.e. 3-line examples). Sources of data should be referenced in the assignment. (3-5 pages each, including data and description; and brief informal presentation of subsets of data in class) (50%)
- max. 8 brief statements of generalizations based on collective assignment data submitted by all students (the above assignments) (ca 1 paragraph or up to 1 page each). For these, students will look at their and classmates' data on a particular topic and state some generalizations they observe from it (10%)
- Class participation including presentation of data and following of policies (5%)
- 1 midterm review exam (taken via Canvas) (15%) Closed book but not timed, or rather very generously timed so it does not feel like a timed exam
- 1 short typological sketch on a topic to be agreed between student and instructor, 7-10 pages (20%)

Class policies

Attendance is expected as it is otherwise difficult to come to understand the way linguistic typology is done, and to integrate data and theory. Electronic devices may be used in class only for accessing course materials. Other use is disruptive of both other students and instructor's work.

When collecting data for discussion and presentation, students should start by searching grammars (which we will consider primary data or primary sources) under any topics they think might be relevant. Students should not use any secondary literature when searching for data, i.e. articles on particular grammatical typological

topics. These would bias the results. We can read secondary literature after the first data is collected, unless I specify otherwise for a given topic.

Students can communicate with each other at a basic level when collecting data, but should let their results be driven by the data they find personally rather than what someone else is finding in their languages. That is, don't discuss your findings (data or generalizations) or ask about another person's findings until you have already figured out what data/generalizations to select and present and have written your work up. There is not a single answer as to what is the most relevant data, or what categories there are in a given typology. It's better not to bias and narrow results by following someone else's idea as to how to do this.

Disabilities

Documented disabilities that may affect academic performance may warrant accommodations. If you have such disability, Disability Support Services (Allen Center 111, adarice@rice.edu) will help you determine these accommodations, and you should speak with me so they can be implemented.

Tentative list of topics

1. Introduction. Languages of the World: Locations and families of languages. Comparing and contrasting languages. What do we compare? Typological vs. genetic classification.
2. Data collection and example of comparison and contrast: Nominal possession.
3. Overview of simple clause structure: Events and participants, roles and relations, clausal constructions. (Review of some notions from LING 200 and 300; and how they are to be extended.) Where do these ideas come from? Explanation of language structure from outside language. Nominal possession ('Whose thing') continued.
4. Parts of Speech (Syntactic Categories; sometimes also called Word Classes): Motivations and patterns for nouns, verbs, and adjectives. What is the relation between conceptual categories and grammatical categories? Data on parts of speech in different languages. What categories does grammar writer use? What criteria for them?
5. Possession 2: Predicative possession. How to have something in human language. Data collection on predicative possession .
6. Existence and location: What's there and what's where. Data collection: Existentials and locative predicates.
7. Motion: motion verbs, satellites, and motion constructions. Data collection.
8. Verbs and constructions of perception and emotion. Data collection. How do we talk about seeing, hearing and the other perceptions. What about emotions?
9. Nominal classification: Women, fire and dangerous things. Data collection from languages with gender, noun classes, and numeral classifiers
10. (If we get to it) Noun incorporation: babysitting and papaya-picking. Data on languages with noun incorporation

Other possible topics: pronominal and spatial deixis ('this/that', 'here/there' systems); numeral systems; dimensional systems ('big/small' 'tall/short'); events of perception, emotion, cognition, and their prototypical simple clause structures; negation; serial verbs; reciprocal constructions

Students can use topics not selected for class for their typological sketch, or they may find other topics and have them approved for typological sketch topics.